

Was Rheged in Galloway and not Cumbria?

Ronan Toolis from Guard Archaeology faced a challenge when he spoke to a Cumbrian audience, at the Appleby Archaeology Group's November meeting. Was the royal stronghold of the "Dark Ages" kingdom of Rheged in Galloway and not Cumbria? Archaeological evidence suggests that it might have been.

Of all the Britain's 6th century kingdoms Rheged is the most elusive. Some of the earliest surviving medieval poetry makes reference the prowess of its king Urien and there are fragmentary historical sources referring to Urien's dominance in what is now northern England and southern Scotland but material evidence is lacking and historians are divided in their opinion as to whether there was such a kingdom. Those who believe it did exist have tried to trace it through place names mentioned in the poetry of Taliesin. Locations as diverse as Carlisle and Cumbria, Galloway or Lancashire have been suggested as foci of influence. Would the excavations Trusty's Hill, a vitrified hill fort near Gatehouse of Fleet in Dumfries and Galloway provide that material evidence?

The hill fort had been excavated in 1960 when heat-scorched ramparts and a layer of charcoal rich soil were identified, but no dating evidence was obtained. Pictish carvings were discovered near the summit of Trusty's Hill. This was an unexpected find as their distribution is generally limited to what was Pictland in eastern Scotland, north of the River Forth.

The Galloway Pict's project was launched in 2012. The unusual location for the carvings suggested they could be modern forgeries. However laser scanning disproved this and specialist analysis revealed the carvers had detailed knowledge and understanding of Pictish artistic traditions, although the subject matter was not entirely typical. Perhaps the carvings were made by a local Briton familiar with Pictish art but expressing local ideas. Other Pictish carvings away from Pictland are found at Dunadd, Argyle, the royal site of the kingdom of Dalriada and the Goodwin site at Edinburgh.

During the 2012 investigation, the trenches excavated in 1960 were dug deeper to uncover new information about the fort's construction. This indicated that around AD 600, Trusty's Hill was a nucleated fort, a type of elite early medieval secular settlement found only in Scotland.

Ronan reviewed the evidence that would be needed to show this was a prestigious site. The few artefacts found in 1960 provided little information about the fort's occupation or age, but there were signs the ramparts had been burnt and a layer of charcoal rich soil, proved useful for carbon dating. Mature timber was used extensively when building the ramparts. As wood was in short supply locally, this suggested a place of importance and implied the inhabitants controlled the available resources nearby. The timber and stone ramparts to the east and west of the summit were built circa AD 600, about the same time as defences and enclosure were constructed on the lower slopes. Only about 1% of the fort could be excavated and this proved insufficient to reveal a complete foot print. Nevertheless the excavation unearthed post holes, interior stone work, domestic material and metal working debris enough to allow the investigating archeologists to identify a domestic area on the highest point of the fort with industrial works below. The artefacts that were found, provided clear evidence of what was imported, manufactured locally and consumed.

A sherd of E-ware from Western France indicates the site was within a trade network stretching from western Britain to Ireland and Continental Europe and may have been exchanged for locally available metals. The detritus of metal working including crucibles and moulds for fine jewellery was subjected to X-ray fluorescence. This identified copper, lead, tin, gold and silver. Isotopic analysis of a lead ingot suggested it been mined close by. The artefacts found also included a Anglo Saxon style horse mount dated to 6th -7th century and a thistle headed decorated pin. Such pins have been found at "Dark Age" sites, all

across south west Scotland.

Other industrial and domestic activity was indicated by evidence of wool spinning and leather working. Animal bones and domestic debris record feasts at which people ate cattle in preference to sheep or pig and preferred barley to wheat a diet identical to those eaten in other high status household in Scotland at the time.

Pictland in eastern Scotland, north of the River Forth. A large sunken feature found outside the fort and opposite the Pictish carvings puzzled the archaeologists. Although not a natural spring, water apparently collected in it and a drystone revetment suggested that it must have had some significance. Carved symbols found near an entrance and opposite a rock cut basin, have been observed in other early medieval Scottish power centres and resembled the "Inauguration Stone" at Dunadd.

Ronan emphasised that objects found at other royal sites in Scotland and Ireland were also found at Trusty's Hill Fort. These included continental imports, a defended enclosure, presence of gold and silver, fine jewellery production and weapons. Stones found near the summit were most likely to have been used as sling-stones to defend the fort. Royal strongholds are typically associated with nearby ecclesiastical settlements and there is a network around Trusty's Hill Fort, most notably at Whithorn.

Why did the cataclysmic destruction and vitrification occur not just at Trusty's Hill but at nearby Mote of Mark and other unexplored vitrified forts in the region? Who were the conquerors? Although there is evidence of intermittent squabbling amongst the Scots, Picts and Britons, the British Kingdoms of the north were overwhelmed by Northumbria in the 7th century. This seems a more likely explanation. Support comes from number of early Anglo-Saxon place names and it is mentioned in Bede's Ecclesiastical History. One of Taliesin's poems speaks of a Northumbrian king Fflamddwyn - the "Flame- Bearer".

Ronan concluded by pointing out that forts of this kind with their associated ecclesiastical settlements have not so far been found in Cumbria, suggesting the royal stronghold of the 'Dark Age' kingdom of Rheged might have been in Galloway.

Questions and a lively discussion followed before the Chairman thanked Ronan for a very interesting and informative talk, although he was uncertain how many of his Cumbrian audience were convinced

Phyllis Rouston

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